

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 07001468

Date Listed: 1/29/2008

Coit Memorial Tower
Property Name

San Francisco CA
County State

N/A
Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.


Signature of the Keeper

1/29/08
Date of Action

Amended Items in Nomination:

Resource Count:

The Number of Previously Listed Contributing Resources is revised read: zero (0)

Materials:

The Wall Material is amended to add: Concrete

Significance:

Criteria Consideration F should be checked since the memorial was designed as a commemorative work. [The property meets the criteria consideration based on its value as a work of collaborative art from the period of its creation, quite distinct from its commemorative associations.]

The Significant Dates space is revised to delete 1957.
[The construction of the non-contributing statue (1957) in the parking area adjacent to the tower occurred outside the period of significance and should not be included under significant dates.

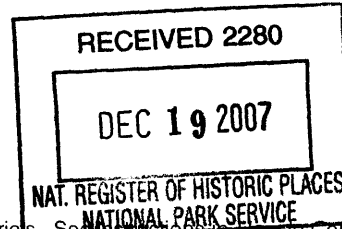
These clarifications were confirmed with the CA SHPO office.

DISTRIBUTION:

National Register property file
Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form



1468

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Coit Memorial Tower

other names/site number Coit Tower

2. Location

street & number 1 Telegraph Hill Boulevard

N/A ☐ not for publication

city or town San Francisco

N/A ☐ vicinity

state California

code CA

county San Francisco

code 075

zip code 94133

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☒ statewide ☐ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Stephen D. Nikesell
Signature of certifying official/Title

12/18/07
Date

California Office of Historic Preservation
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

☒ entered in the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined eligible for the
National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the
National Register

☐ removed from the National
Register

☐ other (explain): _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Edson H. Beall

1.29.08

Coit Memorial Tower
Name of Property

San Francisco, CA
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- ☐ private
☒ public-local
☐ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
	1	objects
1	1	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Recreation and Culture: Monument

Recreation and Culture: Work of Art

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Recreation and Culture: Monument

Recreation and Culture: Work of Art

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Modern Movement: Art Deco

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Reinforced concrete

roof

walls Plaster frescos

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- ☐ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or a grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Art

Period of Significance

1933-1934

Significant Dates

1933

1957

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Brown, Arthur, Jr.

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository:

Coit Memorial Tower
Name of Property

San Francisco, CA
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 1.73 acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	10	552400	4183940	3	—	—	—
2	—	—	—	4	—	—	—

☐ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Stephen A. Worsley, Coit Depression Preservationists Founder and Spokesman

organization Coit Depression Preservationists date June 18, 2007

street & number 25 Kingston Street telephone (916) 281-8268

city or town San Francisco state CA zip code 94110

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

Name Yomi Agunbiade, City of San Francisco, Recreation and Parks Department

street & number 501 Staynan Street, John MacLaren Lodge, Golden Gate Park telephone 415-831-2773

city or town San Francisco state CA zip code 94117

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

Summary Paragraph

The Lillian Coit Memorial Tower (Coit Tower) is located atop Telegraph Hill in San Francisco, California. It was constructed between 1932 and 1933 as a memorial to the volunteer firemen who died in the five major fires in San Francisco's history. Designed in the Art Deco style by architect Arthur Brown, Jr., assisted by Henry Howard, the tower rises 180 feet from its base with a public observation deck thirty-two feet below the top. It is constructed in three cylinders, one inside the other. The interior is adorned with twenty-five frescoes painted by various artists as part of the Public Works Art Project between 1933 and 1934. Coit Tower retains a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association.

Exterior Description

Architect Arthur Brown, Jr., assisted by Henry Howard, designed Coit Tower in the Art Deco style with a budget of \$125,000. The tower was designed to be a "...simple fluted shaft...intended to be dignified but with austerity; monumental without utilitarian function." The tower was not designed to resemble a fire hose. The tower rises 180 feet from its polygonal base and has an observation deck thirty-two feet below its top. It is constructed of three concrete cylinders, one inside the other. The outside wall is decorated with twenty-four vertical flutings in the manner of a classical Greek column; it is approximately eight inches thick in the concave part of the flutes. In order to maintain the illusion of verticality the outer fluting was tapered slightly inward until it was eighteen inches smaller around its top than its base. As Telegraph Hill is asymmetrical, with its long axis running north and south, Brown had to consider the fact that the tower would need to be appealing from all directions. So, in order to maintain Coit Tower's aesthetic qualities, he chose to construct it atop a polygonal base; thus it would present the same profile from every direction. The base provides, on its south, east, and west vistas, a set of floor to ceiling windows that allow views of Pioneer Park, Oakland, most of the South Bay area, San Francisco's North Beach area, and the Golden Gate Bridge. Flanking the exterior entrance is a phoenix bird relief sculpture by Robert B. Howard.

The outermost cylinder is Coit Tower's viewing station. The observation deck consists of a series of arches connected by a ringed sky light. The effect attained by the play of light and shades in these arches combined with the glimpses of the sky through the openings in the top ring was perhaps the tower's most original design element. The second most outward cylinder contains a winding reinforced concrete stairway that once led the public to a second story gallery and the famous viewing platform. The two upstairs Regionalist galleries are closed to the public. The innermost cylinder houses, a still functional, 1930s manually operated elevator in the Art Deco style. The elevator design and all wall sconces within the rotunda are Art Deco in theme. The polygonal base, serves as the main entrance to the tower from the north. There is a new handicapped ramp opposite the front door on the south lawn window.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 2

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

Interior Description

The first floor, or rotunda, contains eighteen separate wall surfaces, which exist in an equally distributed geometric pattern (see floor plan). The base is a concrete floor rotunda with three large convex window panels, one facing south, one facing west, and one facing east. The northern wall of the rotunda is the only flat wall and contains the vaulted entrance to Coit Tower. The rotunda also has four inset corners with each corner containing two gun slit windows. The center of the rotunda is dominated by four square walls, each containing a single doorway that house the stairwell, elevator shaft, and gift shop, which was a former broom closet. The south and west doors lead directly to the gift shop, the east door contains a small storage closet, and the north door of the inner rotunda leads to the elevator lobby. The elevator lobby is also a small gallery that is enclosed on the interior of the central rotunda. Just inside the rotunda are two public restrooms to the east and west of the front door.

In 1933, upon its completion, Coit Tower's interior consisted of 3,691 square feet of blank concrete wall space. In January 1934, after receiving funds from the Civil Works Administration, the tower's interior was transformed into an art gallery with frescos and murals. Coit Tower became the Public Works of Art Project's (PWAP) pilot project. Twenty-six of San Francisco's master artists and their nineteen notable assistants turned the rotunda into three wings thematically divided and depicting California life in all its various aspects. There is a wing depicting industrial production and science, a wing depicting San Franciscan food production, and the city's life resulting from both in the third wing. The sections were divided between artists by surface size and their reputation. The most famous artists worked on 10 foot by 36 foot sections and lesser-known artists received 10 foot by 4 foot sections. The artwork was done in the American Social Realism style. The stairwell was designed by San Francisco artist Lucian Labaudt and depicts busy downtown scenes of Powell Street in 1934 using all familiar faces. His two frescos, the largest painted by a single artist in Coit Tower, extends 6 feet by 32 feet up the stairwell.

The upstairs is exclusively done by the "Ivory Tower Group" of the idealistic Regionalists faction. They all fall within this genre which desired to preserve the sentimental illusion of an isolated American purity with an nationalistic streak, even as the fabric of the nation was tattered by the protracted Great Depression.

Listed below are the names of the murals and the artists who painted the works of art. They are keyed to the ground floor map to show the location within Coit Tower. (See Additional Documentation for map)

1. *Animal Force and Machine Force* – Ray Boynton
2. *California Industrial Scenes* – John Langley Howard
3. *Railroad and Shipping* – William Hesthal

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 3

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

-
4. *Surveyor and Steelworker* – Clifford Wight
 5. *Industries of California* – Ralph Stackpole
 6. *Newsgathering* – Suzanne Scheuer
 7. *Library* – Bernard B. Zakheim
 8. *Stockbroker and Scientist-Inventor* – Mallette Dean
 9. *City Life* – Victor Arnautoff
 10. *Banking and Law* – George Harris
 11. *Department Store* – Frede Vidar
 12. *Farmer and Cowboy* – Clifford Wight
 13. *California* – Maxine Albro
 14. *Meat Industry* – Ray Bertrand
 15. *California Agricultural Industry* – Gordon Longdon
 16. *San Francisco Bay, East* – Otis Oldfield
 17. *San Francisco Bay, North* – Jose Moya del Pino
 18. *Bay Area Hills* – Rinaldo Cuneo
 19. *Seabirds and Bay Area Map* – Otis Oldfield
 20. *Power* – Fred Olmstead, Jr.

Murals 20-27 are not open to the public except by special arrangement.¹

21. *Powell Street* – Lucien Labaudt
22. *Collegiate Sports* – Parker Hall
23. *Sports* – Edward Terada
24. *Children at Play* – Ralph Chesse
25. *Hunting in California* – Edith Hamlin
26. *Outdoor Life* – Ben Cunningham
27. *Home Life* – Jane Berlandina

Included in the boundary is a non-contributing statue of Christopher Columbus that was placed inside the parking lot's thirty-two foot roundabout on October 12, 1957. The sculptor of this twelve-foot high bronze statue was Vittorio de Colbertaldo.

Coit Tower retains a high degree of integrity. The setting around Coit Tower has been preserved by zoning restrictions and kept perfectly intact. The pristine condition of Pioneer Park, the curved street, and roundabout parking lot add to the setting of Coit Tower. Some murals were restored in 1960 and others were restored in 1975. The same techniques employed by the original artists were used during these restorations.

¹ **Note:** Patricia Ambacher, State Historian I, with the California Office of Historic Preservation inspected the murals identified as Numbers 20-27 on November 3, 2007. The murals were found to retain a high degree of integrity.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 1

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

Summary Paragraph

The Lillian Coit Memorial Tower is eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion C in the area of art at the state level of significance as an excellent example of PWAP art and the American Scene art movement. The period of significance is 1933-1934, Coit Tower's year of construction and the years the murals were painted.

Background

Coit Tower is located on Telegraph Hill which has always been a favorite vantage point for San Franciscans. Positioned above North Beach, the city's oldest neighborhood, Telegraph Hill rises 295 feet above sea level and is 2,415 feet wide at its widest cross section. Early explorers called Telegraph Hill "Loma Alta," which means high hill. Telegraph Hill offers the most optimal 360 degree viewing point to the San Francisco Bay and five surrounding counties. The name Telegraph Hill replaced the name Clark's Point, when, in 1849, George Sweeny and Theodore Baugh built a two-story observation deck from which they would broadcast information about incoming ships to the town below. To communicate their messages they used a unique semaphore system built in 1850 by Lieutenant John K. Deur. Residents always focused on the isolated precipice and its telegraph system for nautical information, which was then the lifeblood of the community. On September 22, 1853, one of the first electric telegraphs was officially opened on top of the hill, and as a matter of history, this opening signaled the end of the popular Deur's semaphore system. The signal station was destroyed in 1870 when a massive storm swept the bay. Wishing to preserve the memory of the telegraph station and keep this hill an open space, twenty-two businessmen, merchants, and public-minded socialites bought the top of the hill in 1876 and renamed the open space Pioneer Park. The park was donated to the posterity as a heritage site to San Francisco's illustrious forefathers. The name commemorated the influential role that Telegraph Hill played as a foundation for the San Francisco Bay Area. The park opened on July 4, 1883. In 1887 the Gray Brothers, Artificial Stone Paving Company quarrymen began blasting ways at the side of the hill. Their blasting virtually removed one third of the entire hill: the east sides of Chestnut and Lombard Streets and the entire south side of Montgomery Street, damaging the solidity of the hill's bedrock. Eventually several concerned civic groups and hill dwellers rioted to halt the blasting of Telegraph Hill.

The 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire were observed by the displaced atop Telegraph Hill. The earthquake disrupted all water lines, except one fire hydrant in bedrock above Dolores Park. The ensuing fire ravaged San Francisco for the next seven days. The firemen had to resort to dynamiting complete blocks to stop the fires. Many firemen were injured or killed while serving San Francisco's citizens. Many of these heroes were volunteer local firemen who were totally overwhelmed by the demands made on them within the chaos of an uncontrollable burn.

In 1923, Superintendent of Parks, John McLaren, approved a complete reforming of Telegraph Hill. Designed by architect G. Albert Lansburgh, Telegraph Hill was given an esplanade; terraces, a road and a concrete balustrade to surround the twenty-six space public parking lot at

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 2

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

the hill's summit. All these additions remain in their original condition, adding to the integrity of this location. The most significant addition to Telegraph Hill was Coit Tower in 1933. In 1957 a statue of Christopher Columbus was placed inside the parking lot's setting.

Coit Tower's benefactress was Lillie Hitchcock Coit (1843-1929) who moved to San Francisco with her family in 1851. Lillie Hitchcock's association with San Francisco fireman is said to have begun when as an early teen she came upon the short-staffed Knickerbocker Engine Company No. 5 of the Volunteer Fire Department pulling its engines up Telegraph Hill to reach a fire. Legend said that she "threw down her schoolbooks and rallied some male bystanders to help as she herself began hauling on the tow rope..." After that "Firebelle Lil" became No. 5's mascot. In 1863 Lillie Hitchcock married the wealthy Howard Coit. After her husband's death in 1885, Lillie spent most of her life in France. She returned to San Francisco where she died in 1929. She bequeathed one third of her estate to the City and County of San Francisco "...to be expended in an appropriate manner for the purpose of adding to the beauty of the city which I have always loved."

In 1931 the San Francisco County Board of Supervisors proposed using Lillie Coit's funds to construct a roadway around Lake Merced. The majority of her estate executors objected to using the funds in such a manner. Rather they requested that the Board of Supervisors find "ways and means of expanding this money on a memorial that in itself would be an entity and not a unit of public development." Supervisor Herbert Fleishhacker, also President of the Board of Park Commissioners, was present at this meeting when the Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a Coit Advisory Committee. Fleishhacker suggested that the funds be used for the construction of a memorial for the beautification of Telegraph Hill.¹ The executors agreed. By September 1931 Coit's original \$118,000 was expanded by city funds to reach \$125,000.

During a design competition, Arthur Brown, Jr. was awarded the contract to design an elevated tower. His original design called for a restaurant in the tower. That was later substituted with open space that would be filled with artifacts and displays telling the early history of San Francisco and keeping with the Pioneer Park theme. The tower was completed in 1933 and dedicated to the City of San Francisco on October 8, 1933.

Coit Tower was completed four years after the Great Depression began. Unemployment had grown to an all time high in 1933 and "for the first time in American history, the federal government began to expand its role as caretaker of society as it offered relief and aid to those without jobs."² Like the rest of the country, artists were also suffering the effects of the

¹ Lillie Coit had previously tried to purchase Pioneer Park for the City of San Francisco. She did not know that it was already owned by the city.

² Charmaine Go, "Unemployment Relief Distribution in the Bay Area During the Depression," University of California Berkeley, n.d., available online at <http://eh.net/Clío/Publications/unemployment.html>, accessed September 13, 2007.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 3

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

Depression. In 1933, George Biddle, himself an artist, suggested to his former classmate President Franklin D. Roosevelt, that artists be hired to "...paint murals depicting the social ideals of the new administration and contemporary life on the walls of public buildings."³ Biddle was inspired by the 1920s public art movement in Mexico when young artists were paid as civil servants to decorate public buildings in Mexico City illustrating the aspects of the Mexican revolution.⁴

As the New Deal was being unveiled Roosevelt had Biddle contact Secretary of the Treasury Lawrence Robert. It was his colleague, Edward Bruce, who became the biggest and most enthusiastic supporter of the idea. He established a "new funding agency, under the auspices of the Treasury Department, to disperse the traditional one percent of building costs allocated for art. With money from the recently created Civil Works Administration, he established the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP)..."⁵ The goal of the PWAP was: "first, to support professional artists and thereby create quality art; second, to educate the public to appreciate the art thus generated; and third, to please the patron without threatening patriotism or violating conventional art traditions."⁶

The PWAP became a pilot program whereby artists were selected by regional committees. San Francisco became District 15 and was directed by Dr. Walter Heil, director of the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park. Dr. Heil formed an executive committee consisting of artists, sculptors, museum directors, and prominent San Francisco citizens. At the second meeting of the executive committee the theme, palette of colors and the scale and proportion of the murals was all approved. It was understood by the executive committee that any artwork that did not meet with approval or was causing a problem because of its subject matter would be whitewashed or discarded.

It was Dr. Heil who suggested the artists use the medium of fresco for the murals. The artists went to work in January 1934, using the old, Italian tradition as the Mexican artists interpreted it because several of the artists had worked in Mexico with Diego Rivera and wanted to employ his style and approach. Fine marble dusts were mixed with slaked lime to create the painting surface. Plasters slake the lime by firing it quickly in kilns, then soaking it in water in large vats for about three months. The walls are prepared by a plasterer by building up a bed of cement and rough lime plasterer on which the artists traces an outline of the design. When the artist is ready to paint the plasterer spreads a thick smooth surface coat of fine wet plaster about two feet square, approximately in the shape of the outline. Using a small, wet brush the artist applies the earth colors, either dry or mixed with distilled water, repeatedly building up their

³ Masha Zakehim Jewett, *Coit Tower San Francisco, Its History and Art*, 50th Anniversary Edition, 1983-84, Volcano Press: San Francisco, 1983, 28.

⁴ Ibid, 28.

⁵ Ibid, 29.

⁶ Ibid, 29.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 4

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

intensity as long as the surface remains moist. Although it appears a solid color to the eye, under a microscope the fresco surface shows eight particles of white plaster cupping one color particle. To assure their uniformity, only one artist-assistant at Coit Tower, Farwell Taylor, ground all the color pigments for all the frescoes. As the colors dry on the plaster, the picture becomes part of the wall; any changes must be chipped out.

Dr. Heil hired twenty-six prominent artists and nineteen socialite assistants to paint the frescos. He also hired Victor Arnautoff to serve as the group director overseeing the artists, and the subject matter. The frescos in Coit Tower were meant to represent the California life in all its glory and diversity. The second floor murals were to depict California's outdoor and recreational lifestyle. Artist Lucien Labaudt painted both sides of fashionable Powell Street on the walls of the interior staircase. The result was a singularly unified effect of the palette, the media, the scale and the subject matter. These artists turned the inside walls of the Coit Tower into San Francisco's piece de resistance of American Scene art.

The murals created some controversy, particularly Clifford Wight's images above *Surveyor* and *Steelworker* of what was described as communist symbols. These images, coupled with some of the images depicted in other murals, were portrayed negatively by the press. This was compounded by the fact that San Francisco was in the midst of the Pacific Maritime Strike. These symbols were not approved by the executive committee and Heil was directed to have the objectionable features of the mural removed, particularly Wight's work. The San Francisco Art Commission previewed the murals and disapproved with the content. The commission made the decision to close Coit Tower until the objectionable images could be removed. The Artists' and Writers Union put up a picket line to protect the murals from being destroyed. Wight protested that he was being censored after Arnautoff, Howard and Zakheim's frescoes were allowed to remain intact. Wight's symbols were quietly removed as the city was settling the strike and the press were preoccupied with other headlines. Coit Tower was reopened to the public on October 20, 1934.

Significance

Criterion C is satisfied by the artistic significance the Coit Tower murals achieve in execution, expression, and in a Depression-era historical context. The themes of agriculture, education, urban and rural life, social protest, and New Deal idealism established at Coit Tower were to be copied by many other social realist artists working for the government around the country. Like Biddle, several of the artists had studied with Diego Rivera in a socially-conscious mural movement that he started in the 1920s in Mexico. The PWAP funds were such a windfall for North Beach that there existed a covenant of support for the favorite vista point. Local reporter John Barry wrote in the *San Francisco News* that the PWAP in Washington had been surprised that enough fresco painters existed to "carry out plans so elaborate as those for Coit Tower, the artists were working away in harmony." This good will toward the New Deal government reigns nationally throughout the short-lived PWAP. Forbes Watson, PWAP technical director felt that it

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 5

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

“quite easily may turn out to be the greatest step toward a finer civilization that the Government of the United States has ever previously taken.” By 1933, the American art scene, nationally had two schools. “The first was Regionalism, which glorified rural America in clear cut representational terms, particularly shunning the European avant-garde. The second was Social Realism, an often critical view of American society and usually in an urban perspective.”⁷ The political and idealistic schism within the American Scene is perfectly represented in the body of work inside Coit Tower. The work most visible today is that of the Social Realists; however, the group who painted upstairs, coined the “Ivory Tower Group” were urban Regionalists. The regionalists scenes depict a movement back to America’s heartland, an outdated idealism of a rural nation. Poverty from crop devastation and the Dust Bowl exodus are simply ignored. The Regionalists were much more hopeful of a recovery and supportive of the American Dream almost in denial of the protracted economic collapse.

The social realists on the ground floor were politically representative of the nation’s cultural melting pot. Large American cities like San Francisco were magnets for the desperate seeking work. Unlike the archery or picnics depicted upstairs, Zakheim’s *Library* in the rotunda depicts local personalities crawling over each other to read international newspapers. A significant example of tempered harsh social statement is in John Langley’s Howard’s fresco, *California Industrial Scenes* (first floor north). The only “hobo” recorded in the gallery searches for work as a poor family camps beneath the curious eye of a rich family and chauffeur. This juxtaposition of strong visual images is similar to the Mexican muralist Siqueiros rather than how Rivera might have portrayed it. Rarely were artists as serious and concerned about their roles as Americans. They did not simply question what to paint, but rather what an artists should paint and what his motivations ought to be. The artists constantly redefined their roles within their profession. The simple enjoyment of making a painting or an exploration of an aesthetic problem seemed almost less important than the need to provide a context for the role of the painter in society.

The Regionalist murals at the top of the tower adore the American strengths in an almost apologetically naïve approach, while the murals in the rotunda are concerned with socially and politically significant events taking place around the nation at that very moment in their lives. The Realists place a heavier emphasis on art as a vehicle for political and social critique. These self-conscientious artists had a distinct effect on this heritage site, time capsule, and the subsequent triumph of free speech which is germane to Criterion C.

The Coit mural rotunda began the *American Scene* in democratic art. By 1934 antagonisms were beginning to grow between Regionalists and the Social Realists downstairs. Many of these artists were Jewish, often immigrants themselves. Since Hitler’s initial restricting, and ultimately lethal, politics towards Jewish artists was carefully reported in the art press, as well as

⁷ Ibid, 61.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 6

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

the *Daily Press*, ominous parallels between German nationalism and *American Scene* nationalism could easily be made.

One of the most interesting aspects of Coit Tower is that after seventy-five years visitors today often assume that all of the murals were painted by the same artist. Marsh Zakheim suggests that this priceless collection of frescos represents the "San Francisco School of Painting." With PWAP funds, artists were free from the caprice of patrons: they had no more need for dealers, and they were able to express themselves in their own style. This ground breaking PWAP experiments was their first step toward the thing which Van Gough believed: "An association of artists who guarantee each other's work and living." The Regionalists models were thin from the Depression and the Social Realists were internationally informed, but there was a truce within this school in the shared values of a better future though the New Deal. These artists were all peers and friends who lived on Telegraph Hill. They muted their criticisms for the good of the overall installment. Upon scrutiny, these artists were all suffering and were glad to have a canvas. As Dorothea Lang wrote in 1934, "Make no mistake, if the imagery of the Great Depression is essentially true, it is because there had been nothing in the American Experience to prepare its people for the dimension of what had ripped through the fabric of the nation. There has been nothing since to compare to it. It was the worst of times, a terrible scarring experience that changed this country and people forever." The Coit Tower murals are a definitive representation of the art of the Great Depression.

Coit Tower was the prototype for the New Deal's artwork that was painted between 1934 and 1943. This project provided for "...an iconography of the 'American Scene' for the largest of all art programs of that time, the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project..." that followed the PWAP. The same themes represented at Coit Tower – agriculture, education, urban and rural life, New Deal idealism – would be the subject for thousands of federally-sponsored art projects during the years 1934 and 1943.

Coit Tower was designated a local landmark in 1983.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 1

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

Bibliographical References Coit Application

Baigell, Mathew. *The American Scene: American Paintings of the 1930s*. New York: Preager, 1974.

Beckham, Sue Bridwell. *Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture: A Gentle Reconstruction*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.

Crowe, Michael F. *Deco By the Bay: Art Deco Architecture in the San Francisco Bay Area*. New York: Viking Studio Books, 1995.

DeNoon, Christopher. *Posters of the WPA*. Seattle: Wheatley Press, 1987.

Go, Charmaine. "Unemployment Relief Distribution in the Bay Area During the Depression." University of California Berkeley, n.d. Available online at <http://eh.net/Olio/Publications/unemployment.html>.

Harris, Jonathan. *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America*. Cambridge: New York, 1995.

Inter, Walter. *Old Homestead and Spirit Rock*. PWAP, 1934.

Jewett, Masha Zakheim. *Visions of Coit Tower San Francisco, Its History and Art, 50th Anniversary ed.* San Francisco: Volcano Press, 1983.

Myrick, David F. *San Francisco's Telegraph Hill*. Howell-North Books, 1968.

Shapiro, David. *Social Realism Art as a Weapon*. New York: Unger, 1973.

The American Scene: urban and Rural Regionalists of the 30s and 40s. University Gallery, University of Minnesota, April 1-May 13, 1976.

The Federal Art Project: American Prints from the 1930s in the Collection of the University of Michigan of Art. Ann Arbor: The Museum, 1985.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 10 Page 1

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description – Block 0086, Lot 012, and 011 and Block 0079, Lot 008.

Boundary Justification – These are the blocks and lots historically associated with Coit Tower. Including in the boundaries are portions of Telegraph Hill Boulevard right-of-way.

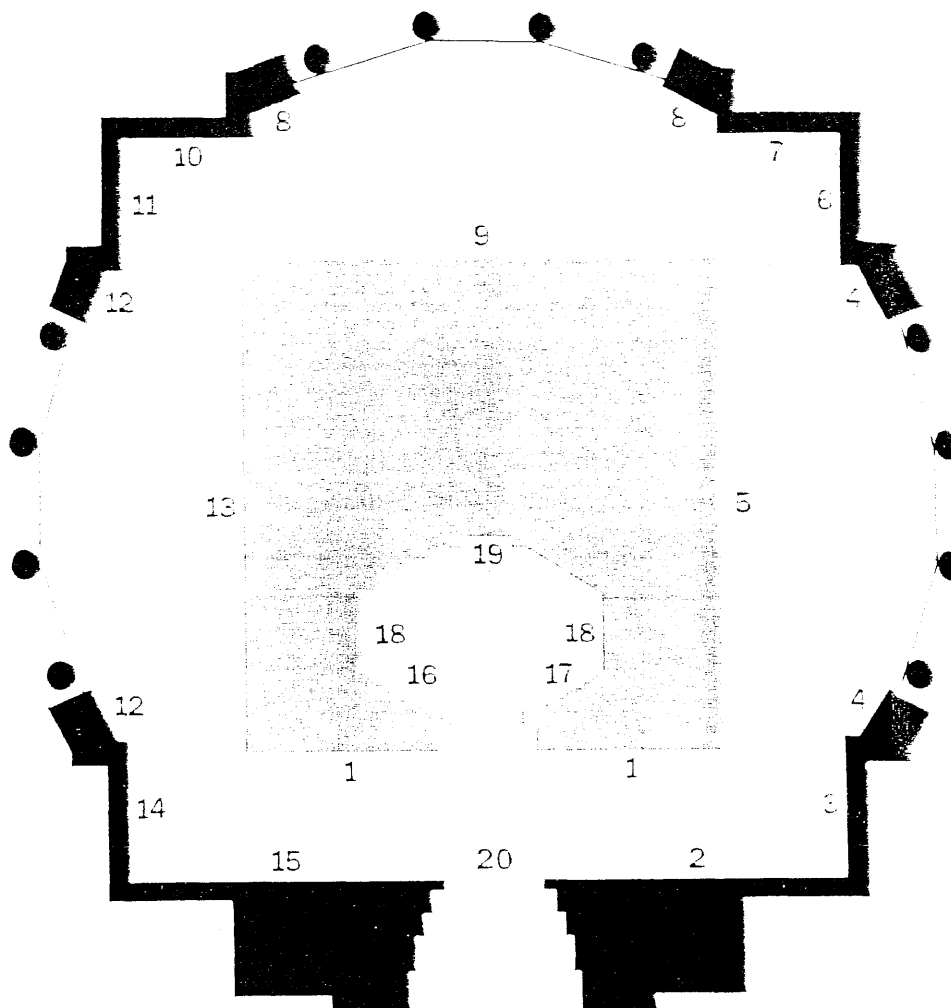
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Additional Documentation Page 1

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

Map of rotunda and corresponding mural numbers.



United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number Photo Log Page 1

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

1. Coit Memorial Tower
#1 Telegraph Hill Blvd.
San Francisco, CA
2. San Francisco County, California
3. Photographer: All photographs taken by Patricia Ambacher
4. All digital photographs taken October 13, 2007
5. Original electronic image files in the possession of State Office of Historic Preservation

Photographs are not numbered consecutively

Photograph #2

6. Exterior, facing east

Photograph #3

6. Title: *Phoenix*
Tower exterior, above front door, facing due North
Concrete
Artist, Robert Howard

Photograph #4

6. Title: *Longshoreman's Strike*
Outer wall North, facing South
Fresco
Artist, Ralph Stackpole

Photograph #5

6. Title: *Industries of California*, cont.
Center section facing West – northern half
Fresco
Artist, Robert Stackpole

Photograph #6

6. Title: *Steel Worker*
Outer west wall, facing East
Fresco
Artist, Clifford White

Photograph #7

6. Title: *Mechanics Library*
Outer wall, South, facing North
Fresco
Artist, Bernard B. Zakheim

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number Photo Log Page 2

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

Photograph #8

6. Title: *Industries of California*
Center wall – West
Fresco by Robert Stackpole

Photograph #9

6. Title: *Newsgathering*
Outer Wall, Southern half, facing East
Fresco
Artist, Suzanne Scheuer

Photograph #13

6. Title: *Power*
Outer west wall, facing East
Fresco
Artist, Clifford White

Photograph #14

6. Title: *California*
Internal circular foyer – north by northeast
Mural: Oil on canvass
Perspective due North
Artist, Renaldo Cuneo 1934

Photograph #17

6. Title: *Powel Street*
Inner wall, South facing South
Fresco
Artist, Lucien Labaudt

Sketch Map



Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

SFParcel - City and County of San Francisco - Windows Internet Explorer

http://gispub02.sfgov.org/website/sfparcel/INDEX.htm

SFParcel - City and County of San Francisco

SFGOV **SFParcel** **Assessor**

Overview Entire Map Zoom-In Zoom-Out Pan Lots Photos Layers Print Help

Find Address or Intersection
Find Block and/or Lot Number

Map Layers

- ☐ Freeways
- ☐ Water Bodies
- ☐ CD/Lanes
- ☐ City Streets
- ☐ CD Highways
- ☐ Railroads
- ☐ Bay Area Bridges
- ☐ High Resolution Photos
- ☐ Cities and Bay
- ☐ Terrain

Refresh Map



Copyright © 2003 SFGov, City and County of San Francisco

0.052mi

100%

Clone

Internet

9:24 AM

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA

Coit Tower San Francisco - Google Maps - Windows Internet Explorer

http://maps.google.com/maps?tab=vl

Coit Tower San Francisco - Google Maps

Web Images Video News Maps Gmail more

Google

Coit Tower San Francisco

Search Maps

Search the map Find businesses Get directions

Search Results My Maps

Coit Tower
1 Telegraph Hill Blvd
San Francisco, CA
Map data © 2007, default location

Print Send Link to this page

Street View Traffic Map Satellite Hybrid

Coit Tower

100 ft 50 m

Done

Internet + 100%

9:26 AM

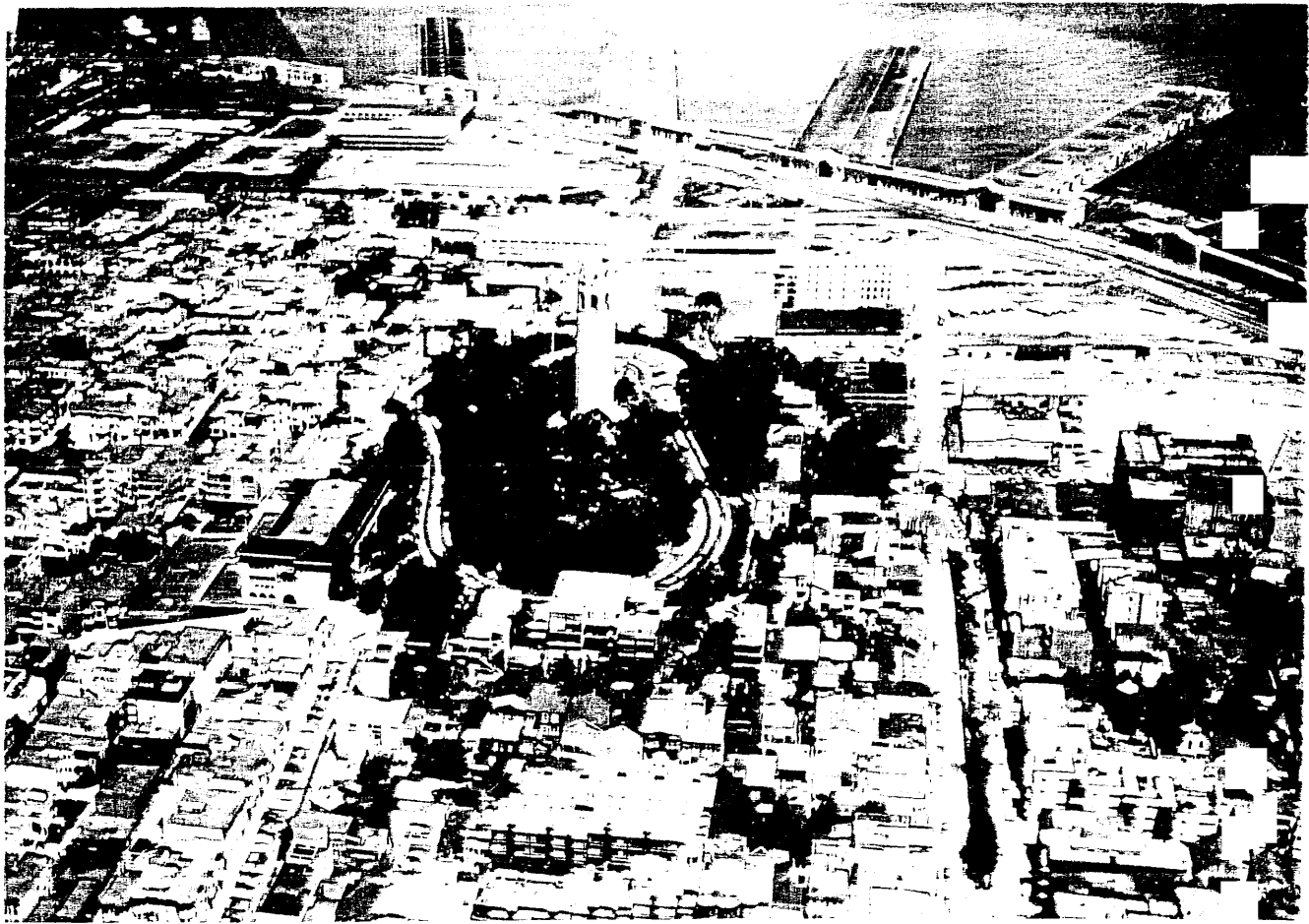


Photo 1

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA



Photo 2

Coit Memorial Tower
San Francisco County, CA